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Speaking into safety: Orientalism in the classroom

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Using a self-reflexive approach, this paper tracks the ways in which “safe” speaking spaces are tenuously etched on volatile racialised grounds. These spaces constitute the rights to be, belong, speak and be listened to. For this, I focus on my experiences as a tutor for the course “Ways of Reading ‘Asian’ Cultures” and examine the responses I get from students. Whether they are antagonistic, complimentary or defensive, such responses are constituted by how my presence as an “Asian” tutor of “Asian” Cultural Studies is registered within systems of whiteness and Orientalism. I argue that this interconnection between whiteness and Orientalism functions as the point from which racialised negotiations of who can speak and when are formed.

What constitutes a safe speaking space? Who can occupy such an area and be listened to as a legitimate speaking subject? The creation of such spaces can be carved with violence. A politics of inclusion/exclusion marks the formation of these spaces wherein people and their capacity to be listened to is adjudicated along normative lines of power-knowledge. Consequently, what makes a space safe enough to speak into, and out of, is constituted by a praxis of power-knowledge that can be reinforced and/or destabilised. By “safe”, I refer to the ways in which people, without feeling under threat, can embody speaking positions. This is not to suggest that “safe” speaking spaces entail speech that is unchallenged. Safe speaking spaces do not necessarily evoke a utopia devoid of difficulty. Rather, I refer to the creation of safe speaking spaces as speech that is open for discussion. Such speaking spaces are open to being listened to with respect and empathy, and therefore speech is enunciated in spaces that breathe with difference, not despite it.

This essay tracks the ways in which speaking spaces and subject positions are (in)formed by the union of Orientalism and whiteness. This convergence makes whiteness synonymous with being western and “non-whiteness” with being Oriental (Laforteza 2007). Here, “Orientalism produces racial/geo-political knowledges through the rubric of whiteness” (Laforteza 2007). Within a white Orientalist logic, how safe a person can feel in speaking (and of feeling secure in being listened to) is determined by how closely aligned the person is with western whiteness. By this, I do not mean to state that Orientalism is simply deployed by white subjects. Rather, I point towards the ways in which Orientalism is intimately connected with systems of whiteness, so much so that using Edward Said’s work on Orientalism can help examine western modes of discursive production in terms of white race privilege. For instance, Said phrases this connection between whiteness and Orientalism in terms of a “white Orientalist perspective” (2003: 241). Consequently, I draw on Said’s rigorous unpacking of Orientalist discursive structures to frame this essay and analyse the ways in which whiteness and Orientalism coalesce within the classroom.

For this, I focus on the ways in which speaking spaces and subject positions are shaped and destroyed within university classrooms. Drawing on Paula Abood’s observation that “you don’t have to walk far to encounter Orientalism” (2009), I can write that I only have to walk into a classroom for Orientalism to hit me. As an “Asian” tutor who draws on “Asian” cultural studies, I explore how this identity forms distinct racialised responses within the classroom. As a Filipino-Australian, I investigate how this identity defines me as essentially “Asian” within the classroom. I am focusing on a course I teach called “Ways of reading ‘Asian’ cultures”, convened by Dr. Goldie Osuri at Macquarie University in Sydney.

Whiteness and Orientalism haunt my student feedback forms. In one, a student wrote that I had “very good English skills”. While I recognise this as a compliment (I do speak and write good English!) I wonder whether this would have happened if I were Anglo. I do not know who the student was as forms were anonymously answered. Yet, I assume that whether they were white or not, international or local, this feedback would have been withheld if I were Anglo. Being “Asian”, I was placed *outside* the linguistic zones of western whiteness. Consequently, my “white Australian” sound (G’DAY!) became noteworthy. Further, this comment was offered as a gift, with the assumption that I needed it. In my case, whiteness and Orientalism merged to ensure that my physicality as a “Third World” looking person needed to be reassured that it “fits” a white, western environment. My body came before me, prompting people to assume a discrepancy between how I look and what I sound like. My body came before me, already formed by the convergence of whiteness and Orientalism.

Joseph Pugliese theoretically maps this unfixedness of bodily (non)belonging in terms of a “modality of the quasi-prior”. In Pugliese’s terms, this modality deploys racial fault-lines which “instantiates the thematisation of my body into something other, as foreign to both my ‘native’ identity and my ‘naturalised’ identity” (2003: para 10). In this context, the modality of the quasi-prior makes and unmakes the totality of a subject, constituting a person as having a totalised identity while simultaneously unmaking a person by constituting their identity as something “other” to themselves. Pugliese uses this thematisation of his body to examine how he is misrecognised as having “Middle-Eastern” appearance, while not being geo-politically from the Middle-East. How he speaks, what he can speak about and who will listen to him is thus (in)formed by his “Middle-Eastern” identity that is other to (and simultaneously becomes part of) his sense of self.

Here, speaking spaces and subject positions are formed and deformed. In terms of white Orientalism, the modality of the quasi-prior operates in terms of condensing identity within a white Orientalist social order. However, as the modality of the quasi-prior is constituted within the racial fault-lines of subject constitution, identity can slip into and away from the grasp of the reductive scope of whiteness and Orientalism.

Reflecting on a research project I was involved in, I am aware of how much white Orientalism imposes itself on classrooms, consciously and sub-consciously forming and deforming the possibility of safe speaking spaces. In this research project, another research assistant and I interviewed Hong Kong students who had studied Cultural Studies at Macquarie University. We asked questions about the things they thought were productive in the course, amongst other things. One of the salient points was how white Orientalism imposed on some students and constituted classrooms as sites of apprehension. A student told us that they had to make sure that the white students would approve of what they were saying, otherwise their opinion would not matter. This student shared this story with a sense of nervousness, demonstrating the censorial atmosphere evoked in the classroom. This invisibilised but strongly formed checkpoint of speech is (in)formed by whiteness. It is at the point of western whiteness that speech can be uttered *out loud*. This student also said that some tutors also shaped this atmosphere. Here, the other students and the teacher form a panopticon-like space of scrutiny which restricts access to a safe speaking space and the embodiment of a speaking subject position.

In this context, access to a safe speaking position is constituted by what types of (racialised) bodies compose a specific space. To cite another example, one of my white students said they liked my class because “all students spoke... usually the Asian students stay quiet”. Here, the tutor’s physical appearance/ethnicity creates or destabilises “normal” spaces of who can speak, for how long, and who will be

listened to within a university class. My “Asianness” creates spaces that are more comfortable for other Asians and recodes the politics of speech/listening for the whole class.

This brings me to the questions: Am I always seen as an “Asian” teacher or simply as a teacher? And what type of “Asian” am I recognised as being? For instance, when I discuss my Filipino heritage in class, some of the students express surprise and claim: “but we thought you were Chinese”. Is this because this identity is the normative or usual “Asian” that occupies my position in a university space? In this circumstance, I am not homogenously pinned as simply “Asian”. Rather, a different form of homogenisation takes place. “Asianness” is conflated with being Chinese, thus displacing other “Asian” identities from the space that I occupy. I have to take into account that I have been seen as Chinese in other spaces and therefore it is my physicality, not the space in which I teach, that determines what “type” of “Asian” I am assumed to be. However, this misrecognition also points to the fact that Chinese identity is the most visible, talked about and studied “Asian” within the corpus of the Australian nation. The most recognisable “Asian” identity becomes a Chinese one, and therefore my “Asianness” makes sense within a western environment if it is qualified by a Chinese identity.

In this case, does my (assumed) ethnicity always precede my speech and other actions? And how does my ethnicity influence how students read my sexuality and gender and my discussions on these topics? Not that I can accurately speak for my students’ reactions, but the point that I respond to my students and the way they negotiate themselves within the classes I teach, is constituted within and through perceptions of (my) race. How I negotiate with them is also based on how I perceive myself and the students as particular “raced” and/or west or non-western bodies. Perhaps, because I was identified as Chinese by some local and international students (Anglo, “Asian” and European) made some students feel (un)comfortable with my “Asian” identity as it connoted a familiar racial presence within the Australian nation. Further, it is possible that because my “Asian” students registered me as “Asian” signified that I would “get” what they spoke about, and therefore they felt safe in speaking.

This assumption about what “white westerners” know and what “non-white, non-westerners” appreciate is a consequence of white Orientalism. A few students were shocked that I didn’t know the ins and outs of every single “Asian” cultural product we were discussing. The course looks at events, cultural products and so on to examine how “Asianness” has been (re)imagined and (dis)embodied through everyday practices and popular culture. Consequently, we draw on diverse cultures, precisely to highlight the complexity of “Asia”. This is the reason speech marks encase terms such as “Asia” and “Asian” in this essay and in the course “Ways of reading ‘Asian’ cultures”. They mark out the impossibility of speaking about “Asia” and studying “it” in terms of definitive historical facts or as a homogenous entity (Osuri

2007). These speech marks thus evoke a discussion of “Asia” and “Asianness” in ways that can be unpacked, paving the way for a safer speaking space that refuses to totalise these terms and the people, practices, etc, they are supposed to represent.

It is impossible to study “Asian” cultures. Firstly, many different nations and people are classified, or classify themselves, as “Asia/n”. Even for those who are categorised as “Asian” or as coming from an “Asian” nation, this is not necessarily the case. For example, many Filipinos call themselves “Asian”. But there are others who classify themselves as “Pacific Islanders”. Who and what gets categorised as “Asian” is socially malleable and culturally contextual. “Asian-ness” is not a static, utterly defined thing. However, despite the fact that I express all the above throughout semester, an expectation is maintained that because I am “Asian” I have to *know* about “Asian” things. A homogenised view of “Asianness” is produced wherein one “Asian” can stand in for another “Asian” and therefore speak about all “Asians”. I understand that as a tutor I am expected to know about the topics I teach, but when it comes to things beyond this, when discussion turns to “Asian” things, I am still expected to know *everything* about them. This includes information such as what films Ashe Bhosle has sung in or the many different types of *manga* that are read in Japan.

However, when an “Asian” speaks about something other than “Asia”, problems arise. The course tackles the issue of reading “Asia” from an Australian perspective, which involves examining relationships between Australia and “Asia”. We also analyse the historical processes which (in)form Australia’s current position in the Asia-Pacific region. Some of my white students see this as offensive. The intimation here is: “We let you live and work here, why should you comment?” It’s that “forever grateful, no-voice migrant” that is demanded. The unspoken, but implied question is: “how *dare* Asians analyse the west?” The so-called voice of the “Orient” can only be heard when it acquiesces to the west. Speaking spaces, and who can occupy them, are at stake.

In classrooms, this plays out in many ways. For one class, I used the term: “melting pot” as a way to discuss multiculturalism and how some are digested (or made indigestible) within this country. In response, one student said: “we don’t use that term in Australia”. She became the customs official telling me to discard my “baggage” of supposedly “foreign” words. It is at the point of her western whiteness that my speech can be accepted. I was marked as trespassing on a white western nation-state.

For another class, I had eight students. Two were Anglo-Australians and the rest marked themselves with a non-Anglo hyphenated identity: Greek-Australian, Chinese-Australian, etc. These students talked about living out such an identity and both Anglo-students interrupted to ask: “Why are we talking about this? We feel really left

out. We're just, you know, *Australian*." This comment reeks of white, western privilege. Their feeling of being "left out" of a hyphenated Australian identity highlighted this privilege of just being *Australian* and not having to qualify their existence by a racial or ethnic descriptor. They did not have to account for who they are and why they exist in this country. The fact that the Anglo students couldn't identify that their fellow students' stories circled around whiteness and westernisation, was also very telling. Maybe because they weren't the ones speaking made it seem like they weren't included, when in fact the other students were evoking the histories of these identities, which involve western colonisation, interaction, trade, and so on.

Why does whiteness have to be included anyway? What happened to simply listening instead of deploying a "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty" in Aileen-Moreton Robinson's terms (2004)? This possessiveness demonstrates that conversations become legitimate only when histories can be qualified in terms of whiteness, or as Said writes, the "White Man" becomes "the maker of contemporary history" (2003: 238). This gendered specification points to the patriarchal logic of whiteness, but does not mean that only men espouse Orientalism. For instance, when my Anglo-students (both women) asked: "Why are we talking about this?" This could be translated as: "Why aren't we talking about this, why are *you*?"

It is the point of this oppositional "we" and "you" that constitutes the safety of a speaking space or situation. For the Anglo students, this space was conceived as unsafe as it supposedly left them on the periphery. They experienced themselves as marginal players in a discussion they had no control over and/or could not understand. The possessiveness of a centralised speaking position was undermined by the inclusion of "other" voices. The danger here was the threat of traditionally marginalised voices (expressed by bodies that are not simply "just Australian") occupying the space of dominant audibility and visibility. This feeling of being displaced from a dominant seat of speaking-power demonstrates that this position is one that is already held. To fear losing something intimates that one already *owns* what is supposedly going to be *taken* away. This possessive investment [1] in whiteness demonstrates the proprietorial claim to the formation of speaking spaces and who can occupy them. Here, speaking spaces were created in terms of a contestation of power. I argue that safe spaces do not stem from a reductive framework of power-knowledge wherein safety is measured in terms of white western "safety" alone. An understanding of different emanations and negotiations of power-knowledge is needed in order to ensure that people do not speak *at*, or speak *for*, but speak *with*. These are speaking spaces made safe because of their lack of appropriation.[2]

While this essay discusses familiar issues, it is this familiarity that is important. I push for a close reading of recurring contestations of power etched upon the spaces where people can speak or not speak. Said offers a close reading of recurring narratives in order to unpack

the continual familiarity of colonial discourses which constitute Orientalism. I argue that such an analysis is strengthened by utilising a self-reflexive approach that takes into account (and makes accountable) our individual geopolitical, socio-cultural and subjective positionalities and how they frame “readings” of Orientalist texts, practices, and so on. Self-reflexivity also *unpacks* and *unhinges* dominant discourses in order to examine how subject positionalities engender the possibility of safe speaking positions. However, it is not simply speech that warrants safety. It is in how listening is deployed and maintained that allows such spaces to flourish. It is not enough to speak. It is also imperative to actively listen, not just in the classroom but everyday.

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Notes

[1] For a critical analysis on the ways this investment in whiteness nullifies Indigenous belonging to land and sovereignty, see: Moreton-Robinson 2001.

[2] The politics of inclusion and exclusion that constitute speaking spaces and the problem of speaking for others has been examined in different negotiations of scholarship, representations and daily intersubjective interactions. See: Edward Said’s paper, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors”, (1989) wherein Said

demonstrates how Western anthropology speaks for (instead of speaking with) those it studies. See Linda Martin Alcoff's paper, "The Problem of Speaking for Others" (1996) wherein she asks the important question: What is the criteria for legitimacy in speaking about certain issues, people, etc? See: *Native, Woman, Other* (1989) wherein Trinh T. Minh-ha demonstrates how feminist academic forums can constitute whiteness as the normative speaking position (80-116). See also Fiona Nicoll's paper, "'Are you calling me a racist?' Teaching critical whiteness theory in indigenous sovereignty", (2004) which offers an examination of the difficulties faced when speaking about race in the classroom in terms of teaching Indigenous content to non-Indigenous students.

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